



## LIGHT FOR DARK DAYS

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2 Thess 2:13-3:5

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

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It's a crazy world we live in. We only have to look at our culture to realize it is perishing. We have broken from our traditional past and are stumbling into a dark new age. As Bob Dylan said in the sixties, "the times, they are a-changin'". Here is how Dartmouth professor Jeffrey Hart put this:

A great many things happened all of a sudden in this country in the very recent past. Without going into the right and wrong of every case, I list them objectively. Within living memory, abortion was a felony in virtually every state in the nation. Today abortion is commonplace in America. Demands that it be federally funded are alleged to be rooted in the Constitution.

Within living memory, hard-core pornography was largely kept out of sight, usually by a rough agreement between sellers and authorities. Now the hard-core stuff is available on your newsstand.

Within living memory, school children recited the Pledge of Allegiance every morning, and in many schools simple prayers. At Christmas time, they sang Christmas carols. Suddenly all fell under proscription.

Within living memory, homosexuals were for the most part discreet. Suddenly, we find that they demand public legitimization of their peculiarity, stage parades and demand representation in governing bodies as a legitimate minority. Is there any question that a revolution has in fact been imposed on an unsuspecting nation?

Yes, we live in a crazy world. We kill human babies with impunity, but we protect baby seals. We censor lofty ideas that used to be believed and taught, but we tolerate all kinds of filth and pornography.

Living in such a world as ours takes a terrible toll on families. Parents feel impotent as the media seem to capture our children's minds with cold brutality and insane sexuality. And, as the apostle Paul points out in his second letter to the Thessalonians, it's going to get much worse before it gets any better. Faced with these conditions and that forecast, how can we live without compromising or giving in to despair?

If that is how you feel this morning, you are not alone. Believers in first century Thessalonica shared your concerns. In our text today, however, Paul shares certain truths with them, and with us, too, that are wonderfully comforting and assuring. Here is the good

news that counteracts the bad news. Chapter 2, verse 13:

**But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word {of mouth} or by letter from us. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word. (2 Thess 2:13-17, NASB)**

These verses are packed with profound truth. Here the apostle reviews the Christian's salvation. He reminds the Thessalonians of what has taken place in their hearts, recalling some theological truths that, although invisible, are just as real as the circumstances they found themselves in. There is an enormous amount of comfort in this paragraph that will help us endure the cold and loveless days in which we live.

First of all, Paul reminds us that the process of standing firm in the midst of a troubled world begins with the love of God. Regardless of how many unloving people are in your life, no matter how many have left you, God loves you and he will never forsake you. The apostle puts it this way: "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord." Despite the detours, the moral lapses, the failures and the shortcomings in your life, God still loves you.

Yet we seem to resist this truth, despite how much emphasis the Bible puts on it. We are so conscious of our own failures and the mess we have made of our lives that we have a hard time believing that God really likes us. But that is where it all begins. Ray Stedman often quoted this little jingle:

*Isn't it odd  
that a being like God  
who sees the facade  
still loves the clod  
that He made out of sod.  
Now isn't that odd?*

Odd, but tremendously encouraging! Here is the answer to that low-grade depression that assails us, to the

lack of fulfillment and satisfaction that we so often feel. The only thing that produces security and significance in life is abiding in the love of God. The most significant truth that Jesus wanted to leave with his disciples was that he loved them. Do you know that love this morning? Maybe no one really cares about you. Maybe your spouse is cold and uncommunicative. Well, be assured that Jesus loves you. You are very important to him.

Now the most critical responsibility a Christian has is to understand and count on that love. That is what Paul describes in Ephesians as “being rooted and grounded in love,” or as the New English Bible puts it, “to have deep roots and firm foundations.” Like a well rooted tree or a well built house, these are pictures of stability. And the underpinning of that stability is love. Love is to be the soil in which our lives are rooted and built. To be “rooted and grounded in love” then is to live lives in which all our thoughts and actions spring from an awareness of how much God loves us.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is good even though life is tough? Or have you quietly given up the battle and taken over responsibility for your own well being? If you doubt God’s love, read the Psalms. They are filled with affirmations of his affection for us, stated in the oft-repeated words, “His lovingkindness endures forever.”

That is the first thing we need to know: that we are dearly loved by God.

The second thing is that we are chosen by God. Notice how Paul puts it: “because God has chosen you.” This could be translated, “for himself.” The mood of the verb indicates that this is a very personal thing. Many of you have wrestled from time to time with the issue of sovereignty and free will; how God’s choice works in concert with our human responsibility, and the seeming freedom we have to choose to be for or against God. I used to try to figure out those issues, but not any more. Now I am content with leaving them up to God. I don’t know how those two truths can work together, but they do. It seems the closer we get to God the more issues we discover that we don’t know much about. I don’t know how God can choose us and yet give us responsibility and freedom, and yet I know that this is what the Bible teaches.

The word that Paul uses for election here is not the term he normally uses for choice. Actually, the word occurs in only one other place in the New Testament. In Philippians, Paul is concerned about the two options he has in life, either to live or die, and he says he doesn’t know which he would prefer or which he would “choose.” That is precisely the meaning of the term “prefer.” God prefers us. This is the word that is used for picking certain pieces of fruit, choosing them because they are preferred. That is what we need to understand. In eternity, before you even were a twinkle in your father’s eye, God preferred you. He chose you. Have you ever been one of the last people chosen when

someone picked sides to play a game? What Paul wants us to know is that even though you may have been de-selected many times in your experience in this world, God chose you before you were even born.

In the very beginning, God loved you and chose you.

And not only did God choose you, he called you. When Paul uses that term, he assumes that we will respond. God invites and beckons us to himself and we come in response to that call. We may not realize it, but the longings that we have, the odd hungers and unsatisfied feelings we have that nothing can satisfy, are really God’s voice calling us to himself. We think that what we want is a successful career, a perfect family, or financial security, and yet we always struggle with that sense of dissatisfaction, that sense of restlessness that nothing will satisfy. That is God’s voice beckoning to us, calling us home.

And the purpose of that call, according to Paul, is salvation. Somewhere along the line God saw to it that someone shared the gospel with you. Perhaps it was in a Young Life or Campus Crusade for Christ meeting—it may even have happened just recently. God saw to it that you received enough information to respond to the gospel.

God loved us, he chose us, and called us to himself.

And then, says Paul, he began to sanctify us: “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.” Just as our choice and call are linked together, so this sanctifying process is linked with the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of faith. Our part is to believe the truth; God’s part is to sanctify us through the Spirit.

There is a great deal of mystery in this process. The Holy Spirit is working inside us, little by little, conforming us to the character of Christ, and at the same time we have a desire to respond in obedience to the truth. Both of these things are true. God is willing and is working inside us to do his will, and he is changing our hearts. And we also are willing, and the yearning of our hearts is to obey the truth. Our part is believing the truth. When we read the Scriptures, we take seriously what God is saying. We recognize, in contrast to those who “believe the lie,” that this book is truth, it is reality. It is true that the poor in spirit are blessed. It is true that we should love our wives as Christ loved the church. And that living Word of God that is planted inside us begins to grow. As Paul said earlier, it does its work in us, conforming us into the image of Christ.

And God uses all the circumstances of our lives to this end. Suffering plays its part here, rubbing away the rough edges, making us gentler and kinder. God uses our failures, teaching us to recognize our own inadequacy and how little we have to bring to any situation. He is more concerned that we learn humility than he is that we do everything perfectly. If we did everything right we would think that we were well under way. That is all part of the sanctifying work of the Spirit. And

delay is part of the process. God is not in a hurry. He is conforming us into the image of his Son Jesus Christ, and in the end we will be saved.

Notice how Paul puts in verse 13: "God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation." God chose us in the beginning to be saved! No one gets lost in the process. Someone said that God has "feet of wool and hands of steel." We don't always hear him coming, but once he has us, he won't let us go. He will hang on to you till the very end. You can't disqualify yourself. You can't de-select yourself. You are a part of the family.

And God is going to see to it that that sanctifying work goes on until we see our Lord Jesus face to face, and we find ourselves like him. That is what the apostle describes here in verse 14 as "gaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." That means that we will appear like our Lord Jesus, perfect in mind and body and spirit. What a staggering promise! No matter how obscure and unknown you may be here on earth, one day God will unveil before the whole universe what he has been doing through the centuries in bringing together a people who will share his glory. Remember the Transfiguration account in Matthew 17, where the Lord took Peter, James and John up on the mountain. Matthew wrote that Jesus was "transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his garments became as white as light." They saw his glory. It was a preview of his glory and their glory as well! That is the promise: one of these days we are going to share his glory.

The apostle Peter describes that process in these words from his first letter:

**Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade —kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. (1 Pet. 1:3-6)**

That is why Paul exhorts the Thessalonians, in verse 15, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word {of mouth} or by letter from us." Don't give up, he is saying. Don't become discouraged. Don't give in. Stand firm. During the Battle of Britain, the Prime Minister of England, Winston Churchill, attended the graduation ceremonies at his old public school. He was asked to say a few words, and he delivered a nine-word address. He said, "Never give up! Never give up! Never give up!" That is what Paul is telling us, too.

And secondly, Paul says, "hold to the traditions which you were taught." When the hard times come, go back and review what this book tells you that God has given you. The apostles, by means of the Holy Spirit, were given the thoughts of God, and those thoughts

were translated into words by means of the Holy Spirit. Those words then were written down on paper, given by the Holy Spirit. Those words then are preached by means of the Holy Spirit, and they are received by means of the Holy Spirit. It is truth from the mind of God. That is the process by which reality comes from the mind of God into our minds. So when the tough times come we need to hang on to God and never give up. Hang on to what you know is true. These are the mighty resources of God. Don't read the Bible to learn a list of rules. Read it to get to know God and to see what he has for you.

Some of you are living in circumstances where you desperately need faith in the unseen realities. I know, because many of you have told me as much. There are no promises that God will make your home into the home you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. Can you trust him even though others never come through? Can you trust him that he is there even though you can't see him? Can you stand firm and hold onto the traditions?

Maybe you struggle with an habitual sin in your life. Just when you see progress, you fall on your face. Yet God tells you that "sin will not have dominion over you." Can you keep trusting his word? Can you pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down? C. S. Lewis once said, "No amount of falls will really undo us if we keep picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home...The only fatal thing is to lose one's temper and give up." Can you believe that one day you will be perfectly pure? Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work. You are depleting your precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job will ever come along. Can you continue to believe that God will not leave you or forsake you? that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing? that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you?

Are you suffering physical or emotional pain which seems to have no end? Can you believe Paul's words that "this momentary light affliction is producing in you an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison"? Can you believe that your suffering is making you into a man or woman of God, drawing you to him and purifying you of self-interest and self-glorification so that *his* glory can be seen? You can, if you "look at the things which are not seen" (2 Cor 4:17-18).

We must remember that nothing will ultimately satisfy us in this life. We need to count on the resources that we have in Christ, and hang on to him until he comes.

That is why the apostle prays now, because prayer is the means by which truth is translated into life. Verse 16:

**Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word. (2:16-17)**

It is that grace that is the incentive for good works. When we learn that, we know that it is not because we deserve God's goodness that he gave it. It is not because we earned it or because we have selected God. It is because he has selected us. The bottom line is grace. It is a gift. It came through love. The good news is that you are greatly loved of God. He chose you from the beginning for himself. He has called you into a relationship with himself through the gospel. He is sanctifying you, conforming you into the image of Christ. And one of these days he is going to call you home, or he is going to come back to get you and you will share his glory. That is the good news.

And that is why, after asking for the prayers of the Thessalonians that the word of God might penetrate the wicked city of Corinth (from where he was writing), like it did in Thessalonica, and that God might protect him, that Paul ends by reminding them of the faithfulness of God. Chapter 3, verse 3:

**But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will continue to do what we command. And may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ. (3:3-5)**

God is faithful. You don't have to worry about him. He will never fail you. He will give you the motivation and the strength you need today to obey him.

The apostle prays that the hearts of the Thessalonians will be focused on two things: the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ. That is what our hearts need this morning. Are you keeping yourself in the love of God? If you are, that is what will give you a sense of security and worth. And in that love you will find the endurance you need to wait and watch him work things out. Our Lord is our example here. He did not despair through the pain and trial he endured. He "entrusted himself to him who was able," and he waited for him to work.

I want to end by reading a poem by Ruth Calkins from her book *Tell Me Again Lord, I Forget*:

God  
I may fall flat on my face  
I may fail until I feel  
Old and beaten and done in  
Yet Your love for me is changeless.  
All the music may go out of my life  
My private world may shatter to dust  
Even so You will hold me  
In the palm of Your steady hand.  
No turn in the affairs  
Of my fractured life  
Can baffle You.  
Satan with all his braggadocio  
Cannot distract You.  
Nothing can separate me  
From Your measureless love:  
Pain can't  
Disappointment can't  
Anguish can't.  
Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't.  
The loss of my dearest love can't.  
Death can't  
Life can't.  
Riots war insanity unidentity  
Hunger neurosis disease -  
None of these things  
Nor all of them heaped together  
Can budge the fact  
That I am dearly loved.  
Completely forgiven  
And forever free  
Through Jesus Christ  
Your Beloved Son.

May these truths comfort and strengthen your hearts, and provide the light you need in the dark days ahead.

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